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ABSTRACT

Goodman's hypothesis, that the task of learning to read is made more difficult as the divergence between the dialect of the learner and that of the material increases, raises three questions considered by the author to be central to the dialect/reading issue. The first asks what influence dialect has on acquiring reading ability; the second asks what solutions have been suggested and explored; and the third asks what other solutions might there be which have not been attempted. The author discusses three basic alternatives which have been suggested: (1) to write initial reading materials in dialect, (2) to teach standard spoken dialect before teaching reading, and (3) to use standard materials but to accept nonstandard rendering of these materials. He then recommends as superior a fourth alternative, the language experience approach. Through such an approach, children would tell stories and the teacher would write them in dialect. This would insure that no divergence would exist between child language and materials. As facility is acquired in reading dialect materials, so would facility in reading standard materials be increased. References are included. (MS)

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Dialectology -- A Behavior to be Considered
in Teaching Children to Read

Einstein once observed that of all the tasks man has devised for himself, the task of learning to read was the most complex. Most of us were fortunate enough to learn to read in our own dialect; i.e., our particular brand of English as distinguished from other English dialects by certain features of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. I say fortunate because just as it is easier to learn to read your native language than a foreign language so learning to read in your own dialect would appear to be easier than learning to read in an unfamiliar dialect.

Goodman (1965) has formulated this notion into an hypothesis which postulates, "The more divergence there is between the dialect of the learner and the dialect of learning, the more difficult will be the task of learning to read." This hypothesis raises three questions which are central to the issue of dialect and reading instruction:

1) What influence does dialect have on the acquisition of initial reading ability?
2) If dialect adversely affects the acquisition of initial reading ability, what educational solutions have been proposed?
3) Is there an educational solution that has not been seriously explored by those who have raised the issue?

The first and fundamental question is, "What influence does dialect have on the acquisition of initial reading ability?" A candid answer to this question is that we do not know. We can, however, make some educated guesses. We know that the incidence of reading failure is higher among children whose dialect is significantly divergent from standard English.

This correlation may be more than coincidental. There is, however, no explicit evidence to buttress the notion that dialect causes reading failure. Still we cannot dismiss the issue simply because there is no explicit evidence linking reading failure to dialect divergence. It must be remembered that when we explore causes of reading failure we are usually limited to examining correlations--seldom do we have explicit and direct evidence about causes of reading failure. Causes of reading failure, by their very nature, are difficult--perhaps impossible--to identify with precision.

In pursuing the question of the influence of dialect on the acquisition of initial reading ability we must be careful to distinguish between substance and form, between reality and the appearance of reality. It is reasonable to suppose that dialect <u>per se</u> functions primarily as an artifact in reading failure and hence, dialect divergence may only appear to have a negative influence on reading achievement. Reading failures among non-standard speakers may, in reality, be generated by the mismatch between the dialect of the learner and the "dialect" of the materials of reading instruction. If such is the case then we have an instructional problem rather than a dialect problem. This would lead me to make the following educated guess: To whatever degree reading achievement <u>appears</u> to be negatively influenced by dialect differences to that same degree these negative influences could be ameliorated or eliminated by providing a closer match between the language of initial reading materials and the language of the child.

Educators have been blinded by their ethnocentric and egocentric ways of viewing educational problems. Thus, when large numbers of speakers

of non-standard English failed to learn to read our immediate assumption was faulty language. We might more logically have blamed instructional methods and materials. Our task then is to redesign reading instruction to fit children--instead of continuing to go at it the other way around.

Our answer to the question, "Does dialect adversely influence the acquisition of initial reading ability?" then is--most likely it does not. We are now in a position to recast the question into its proper terms. "Does the instruction commonly given the non-standard speaker of English adversely influence the acquisition of initial reading ability?" Most likely it does.

Consider the second major question raised earlier in this paper. If the instruction given the dialect speaker does adversely influence the acquisition of initial reading ability, what educational solutions have been proposed?

Three distinct teaching alternatives have been suggested. They are:

1) Write instructional materials in the child's language; i.e., in the dialect of the individual learner.
2) First teach the child to speak the standard dialect. After he has learned to speak standard dialect reading instruction can be started using standard materials.
3) Use materials written in standard dialect and begin reading instruction at the traditional entry point of first grade but with the significant difference that the teacher accepts non-standard responses to standard written language. In other words, the teacher allows the child to translate the

> standard language into his dialect without penalizing him by considering differences in pronunciation and syntax as errors.

Each of these alternatives merits close examination. The first alternative of writing or rewriting materials in the dialect of the reader has come into greater prominence recently with the work of Stewart (1969), Baratz (1969), and Wolfram and Fasold (1969). At first glance this approach seems to have a great deal to recommend it but its promise is largely illusory. Proponents of this alternative argue that the credence given the child's own language provides a powerful motivator for learning. We can hardly gainsay this proposition. However, we might question the basic premise by asking whether it is possible to write materials for a mass audience that represent anybody's dialect with sufficient veracity to justify the effort. We know that the language of basal readers does not accurately reflect the language patterns of first grade children. This is so largely because of certain inane policies that have been traditionally and tediously applied and also because written language differs somewhat from spoken language. Furthermore, basal readers will never accurately reflect the vocabulary and language patterns of children because no single basal book can possibly reflect the diversity of vocabulary and language patterns represented in the mass audience of children for whom the basal is intended. The same difficulties will certainly be present in dialect materials.

The dialects and idiolects represented in a school district the size of Detroit, for example, are certainly not homogenous. How then can dialect materials be written that would be suitable for a large number of

children? Who will decide that indeed the materials are suitable for Johnny but not for Leslie? On what basis will the decision be made? Are teachers linguistically sophisticated enough to make such decisions? These are significant questions to which there are, at present, no satisfactory empirical answers.

A further problem has to do with the acceptability of such materials to parents and teachers. Experience indicates that both parents and teachers often reject the use of dialect materials. I suspect that parents particularly object to the formal codifying of their language in books. Perhaps this is because the dominant culture has taught them to despise their own language and also because society in general views their language as an incorrect, sloppy version of Standard English. Fortunately, these same parents are often less likely to object to some less formalized use of dialect materials in the classroom; e.g., the recording of children's language in dictated accounts. If it is agreed that parents and teachers ought to have a voice in the operation of schools then their feelings in this area should not be ignored because it is not a question of whether the parents and teachers are right or wrong in the matter. Rather it is a question of respecting their sensibilities and opinions. No educational endeavor, however wise and pedagogically sound, is likely to succeed in the face of significant opposition by the community and the teachers combined.

Finally, there is the question of whether there is sufficient linguistic data to represent accurately the various dialects that exist in the United States. Venezky (1970) suggests that there are at least seven dialects for whom dialect materials would eventually have to be prepared.

(Northern urban Negro, Southern Mountain--Appalachian, Spanish-American, American Indian, Hawaiian pidgin, Southern rural--Negro and white, and Acadian English.) Shuy (1969), Stewart (1969), Baratz (1969), and Wolfram and Fasold (1969) have argued that there exists sufficient linguistic data to represent accurately at least Northern Urban Negro dialect at the present time.

The second alternative suggests that we teach children to speak Standard English as a sort of quasi-foreign language before commencing reading instruction. The idea is quite naive. Its implementation would delay the onset of reading instruction longer than the general public would tolerate. Granted, there is no concrete evidence clearly indicating that a delay of a year or two would be deleterious to children's intellectual development. Still a more significant practical consideration intervenes. Even assuming that it was pedagogically useful, could we teach the majority of non-standard speakers Standard English in one year or even two? Venezky (1970) misguided optimist that he is, seems to believe that it would involve a delay of, "...a few months," and that this certainly would not, "...seriously impede any child's natural development." Who among us would be willing to bet a month's pay that we could successfully teach even fifty percent of any group of non-standard speakers Standard English in one or two years time? What about the other fifty percent? Shall we continue to delay reading instruction for them? For how long? Is dialect divergence a sufficient barrier to reading to justify the gamble? What shall we do with those who are ready to begin the task of learning to read? Shall they also wait as Venezky (1970) has suggested? If the task is so simple, why hasn't TV had a more significant impact on the non-standard

speaker's language?

Let us imagine for one moment that all of the pedagogical questions could be resolved. We are still left with the same problem raised with alternative one, namely, "Will the social milieu of our times allow us to delay reading instruction for the length of time required to teach Standard English to non-standard speakers?" I think not.

Furthermore, we must honestly examine the question of whether we have developed sufficiently informed teaching techniques at this level to insure success in teaching Standard English to non-standard speakers in a year or two--let alone in a few months. Finally, there is some evidence, according to Labov (1966), that would tend to indicate that the social motivation to learn Standard English may not be present until adolescence.

It seems clear, therefore, that both the practical and theoretical limitations of this alternative are such as to require its rejection. I hasten to add, however, that the idea may have some fruitful and worthwhile applications if it can be done in some natural way that does not require putting off reading instruction until some nebulous future time.

The third instructional alternative, using standard materials but allowing the divergent speaker to read these materials in his own dialect, has much to recommend it. Goodman (1965) has endorsed this alternative as the most practical of the three mentioned thus far. As an approach it avoids most of the major objections and limitations of the two preceding instructional alternatives.

The thoughtful observer might argue, however, that this approach violates Goodman's basic premise, namely "The more divergence there is between

the dialect of the learner and the dialect of learning, the more difficult will be the task of learning to read." If standard reading materials are used on the child with a markedly non-standard dialect are we not making the task of learning to read more difficult? Goodman's hypothesis seems to suggest that this is so. And hence, he ignores his own hypothesis in practice. In fact, his hypothesis makes a much stronger case for adopting alternative one (write materials in the dialect of the learner) than alternative three.

Ignoring this inconsistency between theory and practice let us judge the approach on the basis of whether or not it is feasible in terms of classroom implementation. What special knowledge and conditions are required to make it operate?

First and foremost, its effectiveness is dependent upon the teacher's acceptance and understanding of the dialect speaker's language. The teacher must believe that, for certain dialect speakers, the sentence "The dog, he look funny," is an accurate and meaningful translation of the printed words "The dog looks funny." This is a meaningful realization of a standard English sentence for a non-standard speaker. The insertion of "he" and omission of "s" from looks have traditionally been considered word recognition errors. We now know they are not reading errors for certain dialect speakers. The teacher must believe they are not errors.

To accept this notion requires some changes in the teachers traditional understanding of language and how it operates. Teachers cannot succeed with this approach if they continue to regard language divergence as a sloppy, incorrect and ineffective means of communicating. Linguistic science has clearly established that divergent language is none of these

things. In fact, quite the opposite is true.

I applaud the notion of allowing children to read standard materials in their own dialect. I believe, however, that there are sufficient problems with the idea to require the invention of a fourth alternative; and in answer to a question raised earlier, there is an alternative to teaching reading to the divergent speaker of English which has not been seriously explored by those who have raised the issue of dialect interference in the reading task. The alternative, of course, is the Language Experience Approach. True, some of those concerned with this problem have occasionally mentioned Language Experience as a useful procedure. They have not, however, considered it a major alternative nor have they detailed the rationale or instructional procedures which make language experience an optimal reading system for bridging the gap between the dialect of the learner and the dialect of learning.

Shuy (1969) suggests that beginning reading materials should (1) include grammatical forms which occur in the dialect of the reader, (2) exclude grammatical forms which occur in Standard English but do not occur in non-standard English, and (3) incorporate syntactic structure that occur in the reader's oral language experience in a way consistent with the task of reading. If Shuy is correct, then the best way to insure that beginning reading materials reflect this linguistic ideal would be to see to it that the student has an opportunity to dictate his own beginning reading material. Dictating your own reading material is, in turn, a basic tenet of the Language Experience Approach. This approach to beginning reading instruction, when properly executed in the classroom, provides an ideal bridge between the language of the child and the language he will be required to read.

Thus, in the Language Experience Approach the mismatch between spoken language patterns and written language materials is eliminated. This provides an optimal system where the language each child reads is in exact correspondence with the language he speaks providing the teacher maintains the integrity of the child's language when she records it.

In the Language Experience Approach the terms of Goodman's hypothesis are fulfilled since there can be no divergence between the dialect of learning and the dialect of the learner when the materials of beginning reading instruction consist of the individually dictated accounts of each child.

Of course, it may be argued that such individualization cannot be achieved in the typical classroom. This is like saying water will not run uphill. Of course it will run uphill--all it takes is a good pump. Of course such individualization can be achieved--all it takes is an informed teacher. It can be done; it has been done; it is being done.

The Language Experience Approach is predicted upon the notion that reading can be most meaningfully taught when the reading materials accurately reflect the child's own experience as described by his language. The language of instruction then must be that which proceeds from the wealth of linguistic, conceptual and perceptual experience of the child. A child is more likely to learn to read when the activities associated with the approach have functional relationships with his language, experiences, needs and desires.

Stauffer (1970) has described the Language Experience Approach as one where the child is introduced to reading instruction by means of pupil-dictated experience stories--the initial basic source of reading material. From this material an initial sight vocabulary is developed. This initial sight vocabulary is unique in that each child develops a reading vocabulary peculiar to his own capacity, interests, and oral language facility.

The word "experience" in "Language Experience" is vital to the concept. Learning to read enriches experience, but it is equally true that experience enriches reading. Every student possesses an abundance of experiences and is constantly in the process of creating new experiences for himself. The teacher's job is to provide an environment and atmosphere where children can maximize their opportunities to expand, refine and extend their experiences. In this sense then we do not give students experiences; we simply arrange the environment so that the child will choose experiences with the highest payoff matrix for him.

It is a common saying among misinformed teachers that <u>some students have no experiences</u>. Frequently, this notion is simply an esoteric way of saying that some students lack middle-class experiences. This pernicious notion won't wash. All children have an abundance of experiences--all of which come with a built-in language competence adequate to describe them. It is the teacher's task to make children aware of the worth and dignity of their experiences, ideas and beliefs as well as the language with which they express their experiences, ideas, and beliefs.

The word "language" in the Language Experience Approach designates a particular emphasis upon the utilization of the natural interrelationships that exists among the various language arts components; namely, reading, writing, speaking and listening. In a well-ordered Language Experience

Approach to reading instruction no attempt is made to distinguish between the reading program per se and other language arts activities such as writing and speaking. In fact, an effort should be made to prevent such a distinction from developing in the minds of children.

In the Language Experience Approach writing grows directly out of the procedures employed to develop reading facility. Developing facility in writing, in turn, fosters growth in word recognition, speaking, and spelling. Oral language facility increases (along with reading and writing) through the dictation of stories and the discussion endemic to the story-telling process. Listening facility is fostered by reading a wide range of good prose and poetry to children. Listening to literature enables children to develop a sensitivity to language forms including syntax, phonology and semantics.

This deliberate attempt to focus reading instruction around the natural interrelationships which exists among language arts areas is not necessarily unique with the Language Experience Approach. It does, however, represent an approach which lends itself most readily to maximum integration of the components of the language arts program.

The Language Experience Approach is an ideal means of overcoming the instructional problem created for the divergent speaker by the mismatch between his language and the language of beginning reading materials. The Language Experience alternative avoids the necessity (and consequently the problem) of writing reading textbooks in dialect; the Language Experience alternative asserts that the child's non-standard dialect is ideal for initiating him into the mysteries of reading written language (providing it is his own language he is reading) and hence sees no necessity for delaying reading instruction until the child learns to speak standard English. Finally, the

Language Experience alternative incorporates, at an early but not beginning point, the notion that allowing the child to translate standard materials into his own dialect is appropriate reading behavior but insists that the Language Experience Approach is a better vehicle for initiating reading instruction among non-standard speakers of English than using standard materials.

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